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ABSTRACT

The Parents and Children Enjoy Reading project in the East End of London is an adult literacy and numeracy program based on the principle that one of the strongest motivations for adults entering a basic education program is the desire to be able to help their own children learn. Volunteers work in one-on-one or group tutoring settings to offer the literacy instruction, educational counseling, advice, and support that disadvantaged parents need to help their children learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. The groups are held in community or infant school settings to allow parents and their children to interact in a classroom setting. Parents are recruited through letters sent home from school with their children. Each program site is equipped with a selection of adult and children's books and materials, folders, paper, and art materials. Three workshops are required to disseminate information and build on good practice. The first is aimed at people working in schools and the second is aimed only at parents. Parents receive help with their own reading skills so that they can begin to read stories to their children, both at the project sites and at home. Parents are eventually encouraged to read and write their own books and stories. (MN)

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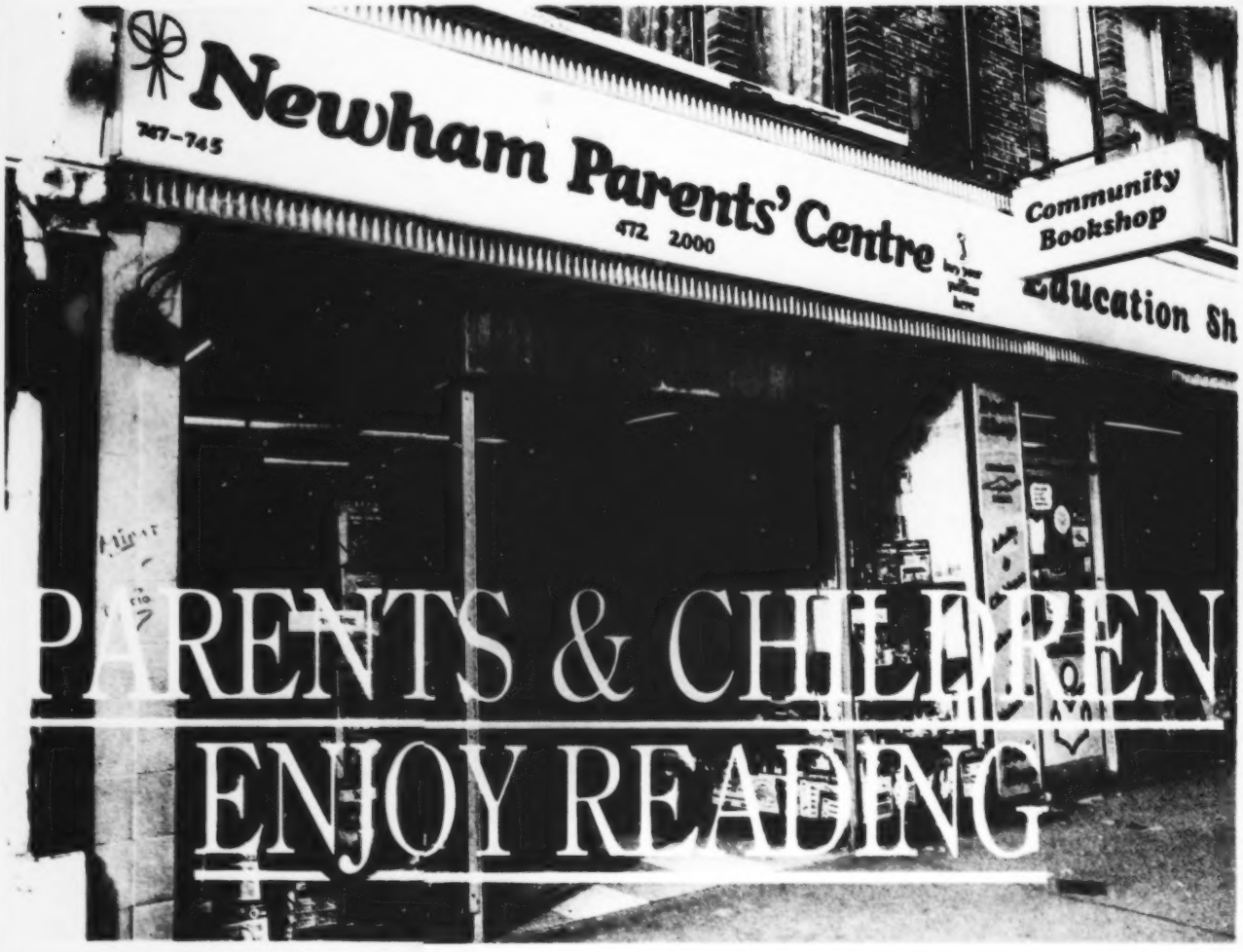

Photo: Peter Ward

PARENTS & CHILDREN ENJOY READING

There has been increasing concern among teachers, for some time, to involve parents more in their children's education. ALBSU has always recognised that wanting to help their children is one of the main things which motivates people to take up basic education. In 1987 Newham Parents' Centre applied for an ALBSU Local Development Project, through which they have developed ways of responding to both these areas of interest. In this article Madie Chapman, project worker, and Angie Ferris, a parent who has been closely involved, describe how the development of basic education with parents, in the context of their children's schooling, is working in Newham.

Introduction

The Newham Parents' Centre is a voluntary organisation set up in 1975 by local parents who were concerned about education in Newham. Newham is the second most deprived borough in England and Wales in terms of housing, transport, education and employment and is based in the East End of London. Only 1% of the population has professional status and the number of people entering higher education is the second lowest in the country. The Parents' Centre is very much an organisation which has developed from community action and this is the emphasis of all its work. There are a number of projects based on education within the Centre, of which the literacy/numeracy project is just one. The 'Parents And Children Enjoy Reading' project, known as PACER, is a development of literacy/numeracy work done with families in the early seventies. Its conception came from work done by a sister project – 'Parents Support Network' – and an invitation by ALBSU for a Parents' Centre worker to contribute to a materials pack called 'Parents and Children'.

In the eighteen months that we have worked on PACER we have had the good fortune to see a tentative idea develop into a successful and workable model of literacy and numeracy provision which we believe can be adapted and taken up by practitioners anywhere in the country. This article is an attempt to share with you a few of our ideas.

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Aims & Objectives

General

- to initiate and develop literacy and numeracy support for parents concerned to promote reading and writing as an enjoyable activity for their families.

Specific

a) by establishing suitable sites and publicity for PACER Action Groups;

b) by recruiting and training volunteers to work with parents;

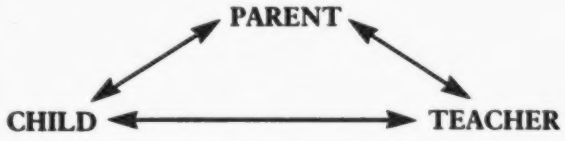
c) by undertaking 1:1 and group tuition for parents seeking help;

d) by offering educational counselling, advice and support to parents involved;

e) by identifying relevant resources in schools and other agencies interested in parental learning;

f) by organising local workshops to build on good practice;

g) by extending information services at the Parents' Centre Education Shop for use by families in relation to working together;



Sites

Choosing suitable sites was crucial and normally we wouldn't think of using school premises – generally a recipe for failure! However, we wanted to get parents and children working together on a site which had links for them both and we also wanted to encourage parents into educational institutions. The local schools seemed the best way to do this. Having decided to set up and operate within schools meant we had to be sure that the schools we approached were truly sympathetic and supportive to the idea of parental involvement in education. Ten years ago it would have been like trying to find a needle in a haystack. In fact, in the 60's and 70's it wasn't unusual to see notices in school playgrounds saying 'No Parents Beyond This Point'! We have now set up in two designated Community Schools and two Infant Schools. The two Infant School sites let parents take their children out of the classroom to work with their parents in the 'Parents' Room' – these schools aren't just paying lip-service to parental involvement, they practise it. Teachers don't get involved in the actual session but are there as a back-up service and offer ideas, encouragement and resources.

"D. has received his best report ever. This has happened since he's been coming to PACER and got more support. He also got his options this year – simply because he's improved so much. I knew he could do it".

Recruitment

Through the Parents' Centre and projects that were already in operation, we had good contacts with parents. However, we decided to advertise and did this directly through the schools we were working in. We produced a glossy leaflet and ordered ALBSU posters. Letters were sent home to parents inviting them to attend a social to talk about their children's progress. These letters had different effects in different schools. One school, for example, is sited in an area where the majority of housing is in tower blocks. With unemployment as high as 45% and nearly half the homes being run by one parent alone, it was very difficult to attract people in. Another site, based in the North of the Borough, had a higher proportion of 'professional' parents and numbers there were good from the beginning. We have learnt that it sometimes takes a year or two to get any sign of success but that it is worth persevering. In our second year of operation, we have over 20 parents and children at two of the sites, over 15 at another and around 10 at the fourth.

Problems and solutions

We have had plenty of problems and made many mistakes. Some of them could have been foreseen but others were less obvious. For example, we never expected to be viewed as teachers. Being local parents ourselves we felt we would be treated as equals but it took quite some time to break down the 'them and us' attitude some parents had. This was a problem which was ironed out with time. It didn't take too long for people to see that we too worried about our children's progress, that we had problems at home and that we talked the same language. The fact that the role of one of the workers was to provide parental support helped enormously and in an area like Newham, it was essential that both workers were ordinary local people.

A daytime PACER group.

Photo: Peter Ward

Delegating and sharing responsibility was another problem we had to overcome. It was too easy for everyone at the beginning to see us as workers who would tell everyone what to do and provide the answers to any given situation. As confidence grew and people got more accustomed to their roles within the group, they took on more responsibility for themselves and came up with their own ideas. The workers were then able to take on the role of facilitators and supporters.

Behaviour was a third problem. Some people liked to work quietly, some noisily and some not at all! Being thoroughly democratic, no-one liked to interfere too much but there were times when the noise level got too high for anyone to work productively. At this point we made group decisions to have noisy areas and quiet areas. Then, no-one felt afraid to tell people to quieten down if they were making too much noise in the wrong area. It also meant that those people who liked or needed to work in a racket could do so without feeling awkward or inhibited.

As PACER became better known, we started to get some children attending without a parent. As this was against the ethos of PACER we felt we had to stop this but it wasn't easy to tell four

children from one family of eight children that unless their parent came with them they couldn't attend.

Materials

We equipped each site with a selection of adult and children's books and materials, folders, paper and art materials. It was interesting how children's story books became a positive learning tool for adults. This was far removed from the seventies when children's books were all we had to use with adults and were rightly criticised for being inappropriate. At PACER sites and at home, parents read stories to their children or listen to stories being read – and through this became more confident about handling books. It wasn't long before parents started to write their own books and stories. Drama was another positive way in which we worked well together as a group. Everyone enjoyed reading and acting out Spirals plays. One site took this a step further by setting up a drama group. The children wrote and performed plays for their parents. The parents helped with the writing, making of materials and buying bottles of 'blood' and other stage accessories!

"L. Has gone up 3 colour bands in reading at school. Her teacher told me that she's grown in confidence since she started at PACER. That's made me feel great."

Workshops

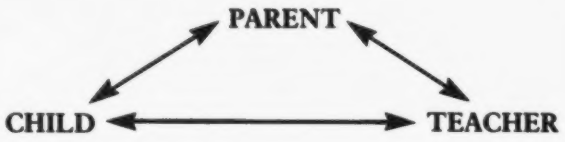
The project requires 3 workshops to be set up to disseminate information and build on good practice. The first two were held in March and June of this year and the third will be held at the end of the two-year pilot phase. We have so far had two different formats for the conferences. The first was aimed *primarily* at people working in education, particularly schools, while the second was aimed *only* at parents. The format for the first was that of most conferences – guest speakers and small workshops with displays etc. We were very pleased to have several parents attend although the small turnout of 'educators' was disappointing. Over 30 people attended and there were more than twenty children in the creche. The second Workshop was much more spectacular. PACER and other literacy and numeracy tutors/students fundraised enough money to take thirty adults and twenty children to Epping for a 48 hour Writing Weekend.

Many PACER parents attended and met, for the first time, other literacy and numeracy students and tutors. The weekend was deliberately informal but a lot of talking and writing was done. For many parents it was their first opportunity to go away for a weekend for their own pleasure. A creche and youth group were set up and in addition to using rooms in the house for adults and young children, we had two tents set up in the fields for the older children. On the Saturday evening, parents cooked a barbecue meal for the kids and we had a social. Some of the parents who attended workshop 1 also attended this workshop but, without a doubt, the format for the second was much more attractive to people who wouldn't normally feel happy or confident at a conference.

Whilst it took a lot of planning and financing, it was well worth the effort involved and we recommend it as a good way to develop a project through a workshop format.

"My eldest daughter doesn't need help but she comes along each week just because she enjoys it so much. I've told my mates to come along – its helped me and it'll help them too".

A PACER group at the Writing weekend.



A parent's view

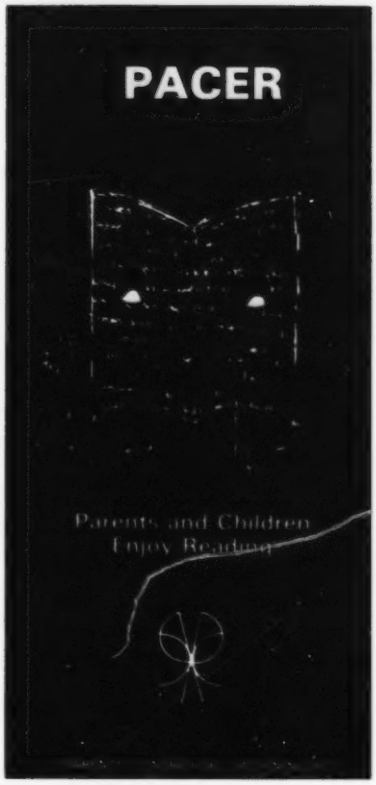
Angie Ferris was one of the first parents to come along to PACER. She has two children being educated in Newham Schools and has always been concerned to help them develop to their greatest capacity at school. The first to admit she 'isn't too hot at spelling', Angie has worked hard to help her children express themselves through reading and writing and as she has gained confidence, she has improved her own skills. Angie attended both PACER workshops and at the first she told a group, "I love writing but didn't feel there was any point in writing stories for myself. Now I write stories for the kids and I love it". As you will see from the poem she wrote with her youngest child, Angie not only 'loves it' – but is good at it too!

1952 the year I was born, 1953 Mum has another baby and the third baby arrives in May 1955. So my mother had three children all under five, keeping us occupied in a flat, no mother and toddlers' clubs for her to go to. We visited the park quite often but mostly in the summer time, mum must of had a hard job keeping us amused, yet we all enjoyed what small amount of activities we had. I can recall going to one club which was run by nuns from the local church where we knitted blankets and made paper clocks for the children in Africa. I know mum never had any clubs or Community schools to attend for her own outlets.

Well it's 1988 and I have two children of my own, Toni who is 10 years and Philip 7 years and from Toni being just 12 months old I have found a lot of different activities to get the children involved in, including myself. Starting off with a mother and toddlers' club in the local park just an hour in the afternoon, Toni learning to play with other children and for myself the pleasure of getting out of the house meeting other mums. It's a whole new way of life giving up work to raise a family, but very worthwhile and enjoyable (at times).

1982 Toni starts nursery school and she mixes with other children, enjoys going off and playing with friends she makes. I felt nursery school could teach children more educational needs, in my opinion nursery school is just like a creche.

The barbeque.



Setting up a group

If you're a parent and would like to set up a site in your school –

1. Chat to either other parents, friends, your PTA, Parent Governors and your local literacy/numeracy groups. Gather as much information about parental involvement as you can. Contact ALBSU and the Parents' Centre for more information about PACER.
2. You are probably already aware of who, in your school, favours parental involvement. Ask for a meeting to talk about how you could set up a PACER-type site at your school. Take a friend along with you to give you support.
3. If response to your ideas is positive follow the teachers' section below 1-8.
4. If response is negative try and find out why. There may be ways you can negotiate with the school. Ask your PTA and Parent Governors for support. Don't give up – if you have to you can work from home. Remember, you are the person who taught your child to walk, talk, feed herself, dress herself etc., and you are perfectly qualified to help your child to read and write. In the process you will improve your own skills.

If you're a teacher and would like to set up a site within your school:

1. Call a meeting with parents and teachers who you know are already keen to work together in partnership. Approach your PTA and your Parent Governors.
2. Use this pull-out to help generate discussion on how a PACER-type project might work in your school.
3. If a couple of parents are interested in working with their children at the school decide where, when and how it should happen –
   - day-time or after school
   - who should attend (parents and/or teachers)
   - what books/materials should be used
   - fund-raising
   - responsibilities
4. When times & places have been agreed, get the core group to furnish and display the materials. If money is available, get parents to purchase books/art materials they feel will be of interest to their children. Get parents to design and make posters, leaflets and letters to advertise the project. Give support at all times. Try and provide tea/coffee facilities and a lockable cupboard – something the project can call its own.
5. Record-keeping. Decide as a group what needs to be kept – registers, library index, names, addresses, application forms, accounts etc. Help parents to prepare this themselves.
6. Hold a social to launch the project. At this meeting set a regular time and day for the project to operate.
7. Get going! Remember . . . if you have just one or two interested parents then go ahead . . . groups do build up and having a small core group to start with will enable those parents to gain confidence at their own pace. Word-of-mouth is the best form of advertising.
8. Finally – forget your teacher training! No-one knows what is best for the children you are teaching more than their own parents, even though they may use techniques you don't agree with. Give encouragement and support at all times.

For more information about the PACER project or the Parents' Centre, please contact:

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743/5/7 Barking Road
Plaistow
London E13 9ER
01-472 2000
01-552 9993

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Telephone: 01-405 4017
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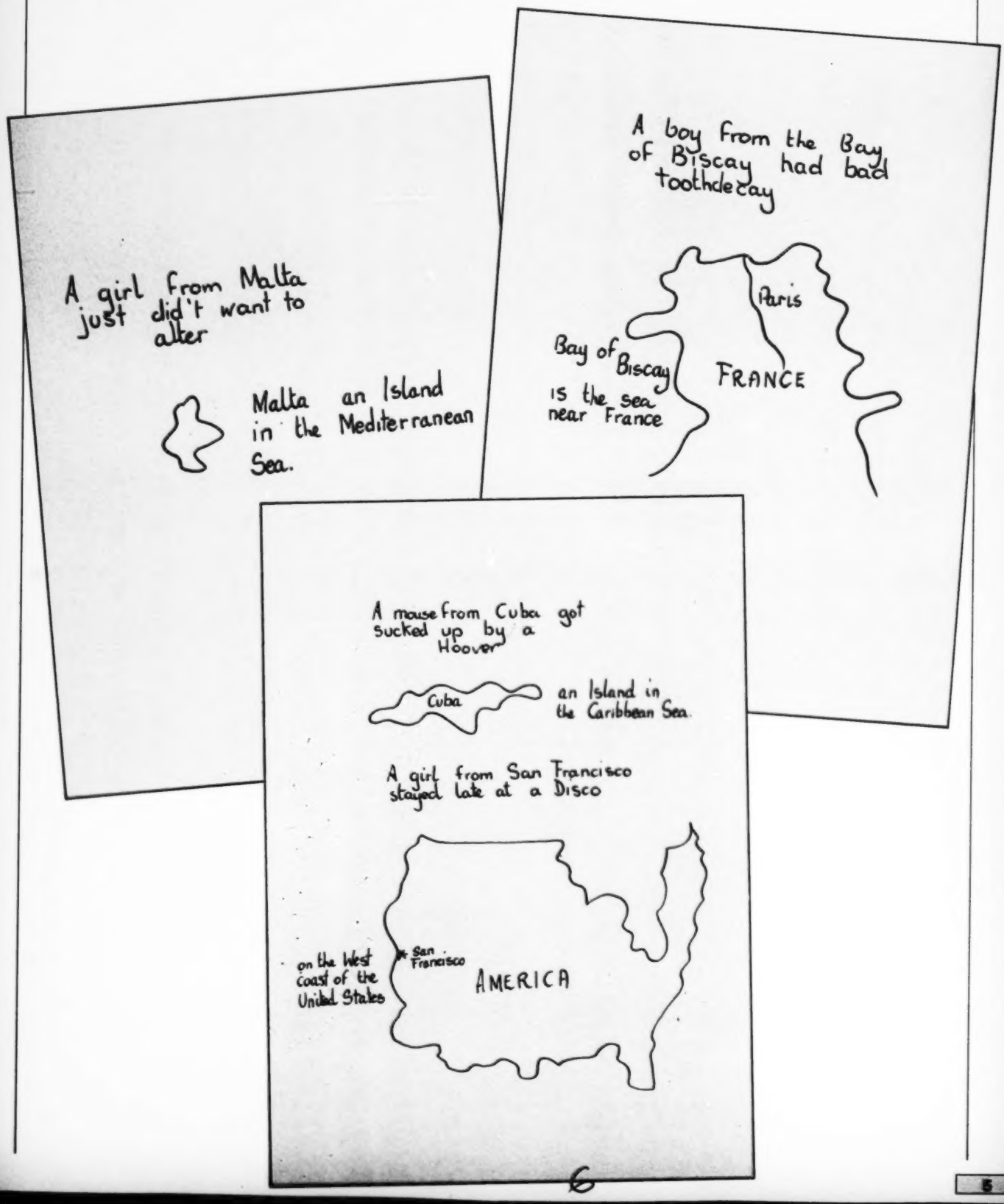
Poems around the Globe

Philip wanted to do a project at PACER on his own with me helping him. We began to think of things he likes. Philip came up with the idea of using a globe. He likes looking at maps and he wanted to draw pictures of countries. While we were studying which country he was going to draw I thought it would be more fun to make rhymes about the countries he chose, so by Philip spinning the globe and picking countries at random our poems began to come together. He learnt quite a few skills doing this project – he was writing, learning how to put sentences together and finding out where countries lay on his globe. I asked him if he would like to draw each country and place his rhymes alongside. Philip and I enjoyed doing this project and he thought it a good idea to put it together in book form so others could read it.


A girl from Malta just didn't want to alter
Malta an Island in the Mediterranean Sea.
A boy from the Bay of Biscay had bad toothdecay
Paris
Bay of Biscay
FRANCE
is the sea near France
A mouse from Cuba got sucked up by a Hoover
Cuba
an Island in the Caribbean Sea.
A girl from San Francisco stayed late at a Disco
San Francisco
AMERICA
on the West coast of the United States
6

1983 Toni starts Infant school while Philip starts nursery. This is where parents hope children do well in school. Toni seemed to be coping well with school life, I like getting involved with what my children do, so like all parents I asked Toni everyday what she had done in school each day. Then one day I thought I'd like to hear her read. I found a book that I thought she could cope with and found she had trouble with words I felt she should have known. I panicked, perhaps too much – you see as a little girl I myself was a poor reader and even worse at spelling and got left behind in class, teachers never seemed interested enough in me, so I never really cared either. I felt that Toni and Philip will not suffer as I had, so from that day on I began to sit every evening and listen or read with them.

At the same time I felt that this was not much fun and maybe they needed a little outlet so Toni joined a Gymnastic club which she really enjoys, I made a point of taking them swimming once a week. The children enjoying other activities – I was happy with that – but felt I was spending all my time doing for the children. Then our local Secondary school went Community with evening classes for adults. I wanted to do something I had never done before so I started Pottery classes, left the children with Dad and had an evening with other people doing something I enjoyed. From Pottery I moved on to wood-work classes for women.

Toni starts Brownies, it's all go – I'm out most evenings of the week. Then PACER appears, a local mum starts it going in the Community school. Toni and Philip enjoy going and I've learned how other children have reading difficulties. About 10 children attend on a regular basis along with parents. It's always the mums that come, fathers don't seem to get involved with their children's education outside of the home. We try and get them interested in a project, reading about it first then moving on to writing about it. One succesful project was what the boys did on dinosaurs with the help of the mums who enjoyed helping, we even made some lovely pictures, while the girls enjoyed a drama group writing a play and acting it out in front of the mums. The children also enjoy writing stories and then using the computer to print it out, I have learnt through the children how to use a computer, how wonderful it is. Most children use computers in school. I never had that opportunity at school.

Toni's reading has come on very well and I'm sure it's all down to her working hard at it, but I must give myself credit also for sitting down with her and helping. I'm now experiencing Philip has the same problem as Toni so I'm now concentrating on him just half an hour each evening listening to him read his book – either the one he brings home from school or a book which he lends from the PACER library. I'm so glad that children today have more opportunities, much more than I ever had, there are more people to go to for help. In the 1950's it was all down to doing it yourself but in the 1980's help is always at hand.

"I was so scared when the teacher called me in to talk about J., I thought, 'we're in trouble now', but she just wanted to tell me that J. was improving at school because of the time I spend with her at PACER. I felt really pleased and its given me the confidence to continue".

"We're moving out of the Borough but don't want to give up PACER. There should be a place like this everythere – maybe I'll set one up".

The Writing weekend.